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Asbestos cleanup 'emergency' declared in Montana town

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Environmental Protection Agency declares health emergency in Libby, Montana
- Asbestos contamination in the town blamed for 200 deaths, officials say
- Declaration will offer more aid to town; cleanup has been going on for 10 years
- Mine operator has been acquitted of criminal charges; has paid millions for cleanup

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WASHINGTON (CNN) — A Montana town where asbestos contamination has been blamed for more than 200 deaths will get new cleanup and medical assistance from the Obama administration under a "public health emergency" declared Wednesday.



Libby, Montana, will get new help dealing with asbestos contamination.

The declaration is the first ever issued by the Environmental Protection Agency, which has been overseeing the cleanup of Libby, Montana, for 10 years.

The town was heavily contaminated with asbestos-laced dust that federal prosecutors said resulted in more than 200 deaths and 1,000 illnesses.

"This is a tragic public health situation that has not received the recognition it deserves by the federal government for far too long," EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson said in a statement accompanying the declaration.

In May, a federal jury acquitted mine operator W.R. Grace and three of its former executives of criminal charges related to the contamination. During Jackson's confirmation hearing in January, Montana Sen. Max Baucus said the town's 12,000 residents had been "hung out to dry" and pressed

Jackson to review the issue.

The Libby operation began producing vermiculite — a mineral often used in insulation — in 1919. But the vermiculite was contaminated with tremolite asbestos, a particularly toxic form of asbestos that has been linked to mesothelioma, a cancer that can attack the lining of the lungs, abdomen, or heart.

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community.

The company did not deny that the asbestos came from its mine, but it said it acted responsibly to clean up the contamination. It paid millions in medical bills for residents of Libby and neighboring Troy, and agreed in 2008 to pay \$250 million to reimburse the EPA for its cleanup efforts. E-mail to a friend | Mixx it | Share

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